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A private militia for an arsonist

Israel's Security Minister Ben-Gvir, known for his radicalism, wants to establish a police force that follows his orders blindly

These plans are causing an uproar in Israel: the Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has announced that he will establish a National Guard – a kind of riot police – which will report directly to him. Ben-Gvir wrested this from Prime Minister Netanyahu after the latter paused the so-called judicial reform following massive pressure from protesters. Ben-Gvir initially announced that he would leave the government if the judicial reform was not implemented at full speed. However, he settled for pausing the legislation against a promise to create a National Guard under his watch. Current plans call for the National Guard to be staffed with just over 1,800 people and have a budget of around one billion shekels (€ 260 million).

Criticism of the plans is strong. The current police chief, Kobi Shabtai, as well as several of his predecessors, have warned, sometimes in drastic terms, against the establishment of such a unit for Ben-Gvir. Newspapers report that the domestic intelligence service considers this dangerous because it could lead to competitive situations between the regular police and the National Guard. Even the attorney general foresees legal problems with such a unit.

It is not the establishment of a National Guard itself that is problematic. The previous government had already considered such a unit to support the notoriously overstretched police. Rather, the warnings are aimed at the national security minister, Ben-Gvir, and his view of the world, as well as the intentions he associates with such a guard. For Ben-Gvir is one of the most radical figures in Israeli politics.

Influence of a radically violent ideology

The Minister of National Security is a notorious provocateur who has been convicted of sedition and membership in a terrorist group. He is a follower of the teachings of radical US-Israeli Rabbi Meir Kahane, who

was murdered in 1990. The latter called for a religious Jewish state including the Palestinian territories and rejected democracy as 'un-Jewish'. Added to this was his hatred of left-liberal Jews and even more the Arab population, whom he wanted to expel: 'they must go'. All this was framed in a dialectical theology of revenge, according to which all the harm done to Jews in the course of history must now be repaid to the non-Jews by force. In one text, for example, Kahane wrote that a fist in the face of a non-Jew is a praise to God. In this doctrine, violence becomes a religious end in itself; revenge served the redemption of the Jewish people.

Ben-Gvir and the Jewish Power party are the heirs of this ideology. Although he cautiously distanced himself from Kahane after public outcry in 2023, it seems clear that this was primarily a tactical confession. Even in the recent past, the Minister of National Security professed several times to want to continue Kahane's path. For example, his party advocates 'total war' against Israel's enemies and Ben-Gvir himself emphasised as late as 2022 that the Palestinians should be made to leave the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea and he campaigned for a ministry of emigration.

Ben-Gvir's radical positions quickly led to tensions with the police apparatus and its leadership.

In one central approach, however, Ben-Gvir differs from Kahane: he doesn't go for absolute confrontation with the state of Israel and its institutions any longer but instead tries to anchor his convictions in the state and use it to enforce them. Against this background, the Ministry of National Security was also a long-cherished wish. Ben-Gvir – who was expelled from army service because of his radicalism and was held personally responsible for the escalation of violence between Israel and the Palestinians by police chief Kobi Shabtai as late as 2021, after many provocations – wants to decide what the priorities of the police should be. In his opinion, the police do not take enough action against the Arab population, partly because an alleged left-liberal elite sets the guidelines in the state, especially in the manifestation of the Supreme Court.

For this reason, Ben-Gvir demanded more powers when he took office, so that he could give the police directives for action and occasionally even intervene in concrete investigations. However, the Supreme Court has set limits to his powers. Ben-Gvir's radical positions quickly led to

tensions with the police apparatus and its leadership. This was clearly visible in the recent demonstrations against the government's plans to restructure the judiciary.

Complying without question

Ben-Gvir described sometimes all, sometimes parts of the demonstrators as anarchists who posed a danger to the state and even to the lives of individual politicians, and he ordered a zero-tolerance policy. The police have not complied with him on many issues, in particular Ben-Gvir's claim that there were plans for political assassinations, which was dismissed. The minister criticised the police for not following his instructions, especially those calling for a tougher crackdown.

In Ben-Gvir's view, the police are just another state institution that refuses to comply with the democratically elected government. After all, in the often revolutionary, majoritarian logic of this government, all institutions must completely bow to the principle of the majority. Anything else, he said, is a form of undemocratic insubordination and the continued control of 'liberal elites' and the 'deep state' who refuse to recognise majority rule in the state. In an interview, Ben-Gvir stated that it was precisely because of a politicisation of the police that it was necessary to 'create a non-political police force'.

According to Ben-Gvir, one of the central tasks for the National Guard should also be the fight against 'nationalist crimes' – for him, this already begins with the display of the Palestinian flag.

In other words, a police force that follows his orders unquestioned. And that is his vision for the National Guard. It should not be integrated into the police but be a separate institution that only reports directly to the minister. In this way, Ben-Gvir could, so to speak, put together his own police unit. A frightening idea. Kahane already wrote about the need to have a police station in every Arab city in order to suppress Arab nationalism. According to Ben-Gvir, one of the central tasks of the National Guard should also be the fight against 'nationalist crimes' – which for him already begins with the display of the Palestinian flag. This kind of National Guard would be the ultimate control of a police unit in the hands of an arsonist.

However, it is not yet clear whether these plans will actually materialise in quite this way. Funds have indeed been allocated, but the exact formation of the National Guard still depends on further approval steps by government bodies. It may well be that Netanyahu is only playing for

time in order to keep Ben-Gvir in line. It may also be that the idea of a national guard under Ben-Gvir's command is intended to put pressure on the opposition and to persuade them to make more concessions in the talks on judicial reform. However, if this were to materialise, it would be a new level of escalation because it would mean preparing a kind of politicised militia for one of the most radical actors in Israeli politics. Netanyahu cannot want that either.

This article is part of a series of articles on the reform protests in Israel.



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